

PHOTOGRAPHY

FAQ

Q Digital SLR reviews often criticise the kit lens. What's wrong with them, and should I upgrade?

A There's nothing wrong with the majority of kit lenses supplied with digital SLR cameras – most perform well – but their typical 3x zooms are fairly unadventurous. On page 32 we review four lenses with up to 11x zooms. These are more prone to focus and other problems, but not disastrously so, which is why professional photographers use different lenses for different occasions. There are many types of lenses, such as those for macro, wide-angle or telephoto photography. Some have optical stabilisation and others offer a wide aperture to capture more light. However, owning lots of specialist lenses is expensive and constantly changing them is a hassle, so a high-zoom lens is a sensible place to start.

Ben Pitt

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FUJIFILM FinePix F31fd

★★★★★

£205 inc VAT

The F31fd is an update to the excellent F30, which we reviewed in *What's New: Photography, Shopper* November 2006. Externally, it's only subtly different, with a restyled grip at the front separating the two. Internally, there's not much difference either. The internal memory has increased from 10MB to 26MB, but image quality and most features appear identical. This is no bad thing; the F30 produced some of the best pictures we've seen from a compact camera, with sumptuous colour reproduction, razor-sharp detail that's more than a match for many 8-megapixel cameras and low-light image quality bettered only by digital SLR cameras.

There are a couple of key differences between the two cameras. One is the introduction of face detection. Switch on the feature using the dedicated button, and up to 10 faces in your composition are identified with green and white boxes appearing around their heads in the preview image. This information is used to make sure the auto-focus and auto-exposure concentrates on the right thing. It's a smart idea, and although it doesn't make a dramatic difference to most pictures, it significantly reduces the number of dud shots, stopping the camera focusing on the wrong thing or being fooled by a dark or bright background.

We first saw this technology on the FujiFilm S6500fd, which won a Best Buy award in our digital camera Labs test in *Shopper* March 2007. Canon and Samsung recently launched similar features and Nikon has offered Face-Priority (for focus only) for some time, but Fujifilm's implementation is particularly responsive, coping well with moving subjects.



The second improvement is subtler but just as beneficial. The F30 and F31fd both produce superb images at ISO 800 – an impressive feat – but in Auto mode they are too eager to jump to ISO 1,600, resulting in unnecessarily quick shutter times and a loss of detail due to noise-reduction processing. An Auto (400) ISO mode limits ISO speeds to 400, which produces better image quality but risks blur due to long shutter speeds. However, the F31fd adds another Auto ISO mode with a maximum ISO 800 setting, which gives the ideal balance of shutter and ISO speeds. Unfortunately, this mode isn't available at the same time as face detection.

There isn't much to compete with the F31fd at this price. Other compact cameras offer faster performance,

more manual control or bigger zooms, but the F31fd's long battery life and fantastic image quality is a winning combination. The only direct competition also comes from FujiFilm. The FinePix F20 (see 'Also consider...' below) lacks face detection, priority exposure modes and the (fairly pointless) ISO 3,200 setting, and its battery life is less impressive, but it provides the same fantastic image quality for £70 less.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Maintains fabulous image quality of F30
- ✓ Improved automatic exposures
- ✗ No manual exposure or focus modes

DIGITAL CAMERA 6.1 megapixels (2,848x2,136), 3x optical zoom (36-108mm), xD slot (26MB internal), li-ion battery
PART CODE N077890A
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.fujifilm.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 56)



Also consider...

FUJIFILM FinePix F20 Zoom

★★★★★

£135 inc VAT



The FinePix F20 Zoom is a classy

point-and-shoot camera that specialises in low-light photography. It produced excellent results at its ISO 400 setting, although shots were more varied at ISO 800 and above. Performance was also up to scratch, with just two seconds between shots. Most importantly, image quality was excellent, making this camera brilliant value.



DIGITAL CAMERA 6.1 megapixels (2,848x2,136), 3x optical zoom (35-108mm), xD slot (10MB internal), li-ion battery
PART CODE N0077830A
SUPPLIER www.savastore.com
DETAILS www.fujifilm.co.uk

- ✓ Superb image quality
- ✗ Varying quality at high ISO settings



CANON EOS 400D

★★★★★

£493 inc VAT



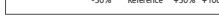
The successor to the hugely popular EOS

350D, Canon's EOS 400D is the best affordable digital SLR camera on the market. Incredibly fast focusing, a high capture rate and brilliant image quality from the 10.1-megapixel sensor all make it really hard not to love this camera. For photography enthusiasts who want to upgrade from a film SLR or compact camera, this is undoubtedly the model to get.



DIGITAL CAMERA 10.1 megapixels (3,888x2,592), 3x optical zoom (18-55mm), CompactFlash slot, li-ion battery
PART CODE 12378009AA
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.canon.co.uk

- ✓ Fantastic image quality
- ✗ Finite continuous mode



CANON PowerShot A710 IS

★★★★★

£190 inc VAT

When people ask us to recommend a camera, we usually ask whether they want one that's small and easy to use or one with advanced controls and a big zoom. But why should you have to choose? There's no reason why a camera can't have fantastic image quality, accessible, comprehensive controls, fast performance and a big zoom, all wrapped up in a compact case. Surprisingly few manufacturers have attempted to build such a camera, usually disregarding at least one of the above in a bid to cater for a specific type of user. However, Canon's A710 IS appears on paper as if it might just have it all, which is tantalising considering the sub-£200 price.

Admittedly, a few corners have been cut to bring the A710 IS in at this price, but they're in areas with minimal impact on the user experience or the resulting pictures. The plastic body isn't that glamorous and, at 210g, it isn't ultra-compact. The use of AA batteries means you'll need to spend more on rechargeable batteries, but this does make it cheaper and easier to carry spares.

Around the back, there's an optical viewfinder and a 2½in screen. Despite the latter's 115,000-pixel resolution, manual focus works well. There aren't many dedicated single-function buttons, but Canon's well-conceived menus mean that key functions are close to hand, including shutter speed and aperture

controls during priority and manual exposure modes.

Performance is up to scratch. The camera captured a picture just 1½ seconds after switching on, and again every two seconds. Continuous mode captured at 1.7 frames per second (fps) and browsing pictures stored on SD card was seriously quick. The flash was slow to recharge, though, taking around four seconds, and longer when the batteries were on their last legs.

Image quality was more variable. Colours in most of our test photos were hard to fault, with the camera favouring natural rather than flattering tones and coping well with artificial light. However, Auto mode produced underexposed shots in low light, while Program mode resorted to blur-inducing long shutter speeds. A High ISO option remedied the situation in both instances, but its function isn't clearly labelled for casual users. The worst offender was flash photography, where uneven

flash dispersion resulted in heavy underexposure towards the top and bottom of pictures at wide-angle zoom settings.

Images compared well for sharpness and detail against other 7-megapixel cameras' output. However, we noticed some chromatic aberration, resulting in a blue fringe around sharp, bright objects towards the right edge of pictures. Noise started creeping into

the shadows at the ISO 100 setting and became invasive at ISO 400, though this and the maximum ISO 800 setting were usable for when low light demanded them.

The highlight of this camera is its 6x zoom lens. Optical image stabilisation is included to counteract blur from camera shake – a problem that's exacerbated by big zooms. We shot with a 1/5s shutter speed at the full telephoto zoom extension and achieved a 30 per cent success rate in capturing a sharp photo. This might not sound like much, but a zero per cent result is pretty much guaranteed without image stabilisation. For less-challenging situations such as wide-angle shots and telephoto photography in bright conditions, most shots suffered no signs of blur.

The A710 IS promises everything we look for in a compact camera, and nearly delivers. It lacks only fantastic image quality, but still manages to be above average in this regard, which by today's standards isn't much cause for concern. With a well-conceived set of features and an aggressively low price, it will suit many who don't want to choose between compactness and versatility.

Ben Pitt



SUMMARY

- ✓ 6x zoom stabilised lens
- ✓ Low price
- ✗ Image quality has its flaws

DIGITAL CAMERA 7.1 megapixels (3,072x2,304), 6x optical zoom (35-210mm), SD slot (16MB card supplied), two AA batteries
PART CODE 12868001
SUPPLIER www.rankhour.com
DETAILS www.canon.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 56)



PANASONIC Lumix DMC-FZ50

★★★★★

£345 inc VAT



Panasonic's Lumix DMC-FX50 gives almost digital SLR performance on a much lower budget. The huge 12x optical stabilised zoom lens and 10-megapixel CCD allow you to get close to the action. Image quality is excellent at low ISO settings, but ISO 400 or higher produces grainy images. It's the best super-zoom digital camera on the market.



DIGITAL CAMERA 10.0 megapixels (3,648x2,736), 12x optical zoom (35-420mm), SD slot (32MB card supplied), li-ion battery
PART CODE PANLUMFZ50
SUPPLIER www.fotosense.co.uk
DETAILS www.panasonic.co.uk
 ✓ Fantastic handling; beautiful pictures in well-lit conditions
 ✗ Image quality slumps as ISO setting rises
FULL REVIEW Jan 2007



NIKON Coolpix L4

★★★★★

£71 inc VAT

One of the lowest-priced digital cameras around, Nikon's Coolpix L4 is surprisingly good. The 4-megapixel sensor might seem a little low, but it's good enough for prints at 5x7in. Image quality is excellent, comparing well with that of cameras costing three times as much. If you're on a very tight budget, the Coolpix L4 is an excellent choice.



DIGITAL CAMERA 4.0 megapixels (2,272x1,704 pixels), 3x optical zoom, 10MB internal memory, SD slot, 2x AA batteries
PART CODE VVA640E6
SUPPLIER www.pixmania.co.uk
DETAILS www.nikon.co.uk
 ✓ Excellent image quality; excellent value
 ✗ Slow, especially in low light
FULL REVIEW Dec 2006



CASIO Exilim Zoom EX-Z850

★★★★★

£200 inc VAT

An 8-megapixel sensor, 2½in screen and a mind-boggling array of features make the Exilim Zoom EX-Z850 an attractive compact camera. It's quick to take pictures, and the battery life of 551 shots from a single charge is the best we've seen from a compact camera. Only aggressive noise reduction in indoor scenes prevented it getting top marks.



DIGITAL CAMERA 8 megapixels (3,264x2,448 pixels), 3x optical zoom, 8MB internal memory, SD slot, li-ion battery
PART CODE 30041976
SUPPLIER www.techstone.co.uk
DETAILS www.casio.co.uk
 ✓ Packed with features
 ✗ Loss of detail at high ISO settings
FULL REVIEW Jan 2007



TAMRON 18-200mm XR Di II

★★★★★
£266 inc VAT

Ranging from 29-320mm (35mm-equivalent), the Di II could make lens swapping unnecessary, which is convenient and also eliminates the risk of dust entering the camera.

Of the four lenses here, this exhibited the sharpest focus, particularly towards the edges of photos. However, it suffered more barrel and pincushion distortion than the others, warping the geometry of photos at the extremes of the zoom range. Chromatic aberrations (where the red, blue and green elements of an image don't line up) were sometimes visible, but both these problems were rarely perceptible in normal use.

Overall, this is the best lens on test, and its price is competitive.



SUMMARY

- ✓ Excellent zoom range
- ✓ Outstanding edge-to-edge focus
- ✗ Barrel and pincushion distortion

DIGITAL SLR LENS 11x zoom (18-200mm), f/3.5-f/6.3 aperture, 45cm macro focus, 423g. Available for Canon AF, Nikon AFD, Pentax AF and Minolta AFD mounts PART CODE A14E SUPPLIER www.tecno.co.uk DETAILS www.tamron.co.uk

SIGMA 18-200mm f/3.5-6.3 DC

★★★★★
£232 inc VAT

This versatile lens matches the Tamron Di II's specifications and is remarkably affordable. You could spend even less on separate 18-55mm and 55-200mm lenses, but having the 11x zoom range in a single lens is more convenient.

Achieving sharp focus across such a large zoom range isn't easy, however. The Sigma lens by no means disgraces itself, but focus deteriorates towards the corners of pictures. Still, there were barely any signs of vignetting (darkened corners) or chromatic aberrations (misaligned primary colours).

The Tamron Di II's superior sharpness wins it our vote, but this lens isn't far behind.



SUMMARY

- ✓ Excellent zoom range
- ✓ Little vignetting or chromatic aberrations
- ✗ Disappointing corner sharpness

DIGITAL SLR LENS 11x zoom (18-200mm), f/3.5-f/6.3 aperture, 45cm macro focus, 405g. Available for Sigma AF, Canon AF, Nikon AFD, Pentax AF and Sony AF mounts PART CODE 777927 SUPPLIER www.expansys.com DETAILS www.sigma-imaging-uk.com

SIGMA 18-50mm f/3.5-5.6 DC

★★★
£70 inc VAT

This low-cost lens's 18-50mm zoom is less than that of the kit lenses bundled with entry-level digital SLRs, but we were curious to find out whether it produced better pictures.

We compared it to the 18-55mm kit lens included with the Canon EOS 400D (see 'Also consider...' page 30), and although the Sigma DC feels better made, its pictures were worse. Focus wasn't as sharp, although it maintained a fair degree of sharpness towards the edges of photos.

Considering that £70 is more than the price difference between body-only SLRs and SLRs with kit lenses, we recommend sticking with the kit if your budget is limited.



SUMMARY

- ✓ Above-average sharpness at photo edges
- ✗ Soft focus at centre
- ✗ No better than kit lenses

DIGITAL SLR LENS 2.8x zoom (18-50mm), f/3.5-f/5.6 aperture, 25cm macro focus, 250g. Available for Sigma AF, Canon AF, Nikon AFD, Pentax AF, Sony AF and Four Thirds mounts PART CODE 521927 SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk DETAILS www.sigma-imaging-uk.com

CANON EF 28-200mm f/3.5-5.6 USM

★★★★★
£285 inc VAT

This 45-320mm (35mm equivalent) lens is bigger and heavier than the others tested, and it's the only one not to allow wide-angle photography.

Its ultrasonic motor (USM) is quicker and quieter at focusing than the others, but we didn't notice a huge difference. While the 45cm closest macro focus is unremarkable, at the 200mm telephoto zoom setting this distance falls to around 15cm, allowing for spectacular macro photography with an extremely shallow depth of field. However, these pictures were never razor-sharp. Chromatic aberrations were visible towards the edges of many of our test photos, giving a halo of discoloration to high-contrast objects.



SUMMARY

- ✓ Excellent tele-macro mode
- ✗ Chromatic aberrations
- ✗ No wide-angle setting

DIGITAL SLR LENS 7x zoom (28-200mm), f/3.5-f/5.6 aperture, 45cm macro focus, 500g. Canon EF mount PART CODE 6470A002 SUPPLIER www.jessops.com DETAILS www.canon.co.uk

CHOOSING A... Digital SLR Camera

Follow the steps to find your ideal specs

RESOLUTION: 6 megapixels
SUPPLIED LENS: 18-55mm, f/3.5-f/5.6
MONITORING: 2½in, 215,000-pixel LCD screen
CONTINUOUS SHOOTING: 2½fps
SUPPLIED MEMORY: None
Recommended minimum in grey

1 A digital SLR camera with the specifications shown above will cost around £400 and suit photography enthusiasts on a budget. Despite being an entry-level digital SLR, image quality will be in a different league to all but the best fixed-lens cameras, particularly when it comes to smooth, sharp detail with minimal image noise.

2 Spend more and you'll get a camera with a higher resolution. Ten megapixels is common even for some entry-level models. This gives finer detail, although the difference isn't as great as the figures might suggest.

3 The kit lenses supplied with budget digital SLRs can take excellent pictures, but their zoom ranges and macro-focus capabilities are limited. If you're interested in telephoto photography, consider buying a second lens, perhaps with a 70-200mm focal length. Alternatively, buy a body-only camera and an 18-200mm or similar lens. Aperture values tell you how much light the lens can capture at either end of its zoom range; the lower the f-number, the brighter the lens.

4 A 2½in, 200,000-pixel screen is standard among digital SLRs, but you'll be using the optical viewfinder to compose shots. Its through-the-lens (TTL) view shows exactly what is captured by the camera's sensor and makes manual focusing easy. A second, passive LCD screen is useful for displaying camera settings.

5 Most affordable SLRs outperform even the fastest compact cameras. However, look out for a fast continuous mode, autofocus and shutter lag if quick-fire photography is a priority.

6 Digital SLRs usually don't come with any storage, so budget around £30 for a fast (at least 60x) 1GB CompactFlash or SD card to ensure that it doesn't create a performance bottleneck.